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ABSTRACT

This study examined patterns and developments in the communicative strategies of 3-year-old children over the course of their first year in a small, rural playgroup. It also: identified factors in the dynamics of children's playgroup experiences that correlated with the developments observed, investigated mothers' and playgroup staffs' perceptions of the children, and considered how individual identity was created and recreated through the process of acquiring new "voices" in new social domains. Data from interviews with playgroup staff and parents, audio and video recordings of playgroup and home interactions, field notes, and a research diary indicated that playgroup staff viewed children as less confident and less able to communicate than did their mothers. There were significant differences in the quantity and type of talk in the two contexts. In the playgroup, there was a constant buzz of talk made up of a mosaic of conversations. However, compared to home, the children engaged in very few sustained exchanges, and many of their exchanges remained unfinished due to interruptions. At home, children frequently initiated and set the pace of conversational exchanges. Their home interactions tended to be dominated by talk, with body movements for emphasis. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Is Every Child's Voice Heard ?

Case studies of 3-year old children's talk at home and in a pre-school playgroup

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1. Introduction

When young children join playgroup, they are exposed to a new environment of which they often have no previous knowledge or personal experience. Different children adapt differently to this new world, adopting a range of ways to communicate with their peers and with adults. This ESRC-funded study follows the experiences of four 3-year-old children over the course of their first year in a small rural playgroup, using video and audio recordings of their interactions at home and in playgroup. The study observes patterns and developments in the communicative strategies used by the children, both at home and in playgroup, and identifies factors in the dynamics of children's playgroup experiences that correlate with the developments observed. The study also explores the mothers' and playgroup staff's perceptions of the children, and considers how individual identity is created and re-created through the process of acquiring new 'voices' in new social domains.

The research questions are:

1 By the end of one year at playgroup, how are some children constructed as more socially confident and better communicators than others? What sequences of playgroup experiences and what other factors may have influenced these outcomes?

2 Are there significant patterns and/or developments in the type and quantity of individual children's communicative strategies during their first year at playgroup?

3 Are there identifiable factors in the dynamics of children's playgroup experiences with regard to:
   - the social/ interactive characteristics of playgroup
   - different playgroup activities
   - the child's age, season of birth, social background, gender and personal characteristics

2. Background to the research

This research project has been fuelled both by a personal interest in the diversity of ways that children express themselves, and by changing social and political attitudes towards early years education. It is based on the premise that working with young children is a rewarding, demanding and above all privileged experience.

Historically, largely due to a lack of adequate funding and lack of recognition of its importance, pre-school provision in England has evolved in an ad hoc fashion and has been provided in a number of voluntary, state-funded and private institutions, by a range of differently trained staff. Although there are regional variations within England, for many years playgroups have been the single largest pre-school provider, consistently catering for 50% or more of all 3 and 4 year olds (DfES, 2001), and staffed mostly by women from a child development/care rather than education background (DfEE, 1999). However, since the mid-1990s, the combined advent of more

widespread state funding, Ofsted inspections, the Foundation Stage Curriculum for 3-5 year olds (DfEE, 2000), changes in primary education that have impacted on early years education, including a shift towards single entry to primary school in September and early years assessment measures, have all contributed to tensions in playgroup practice between promoting children's language and social/emotional development and encouraging children to acquire Literacy and Numeracy skills.

Against this background of politically instigated change and contentious debate about appropriate provision for and assessment of pre-school children, this study foregrounds individual children's experiences of current preschool provision during their first year in one playgroup. By focussing on individual children's communicative strategies, by comparing the strategies used in the home and in the preschool setting and by tracking the development of new strategies over the course of time, the study attempts to improve understandings of the complexity and multiplicity of the ways in which young children express themselves. This in turn demonstrates the importance of learning to recognise and to listen to the diversity of their voices.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

The study draws on post-modern interpretations of knowledge and truths not only to reflect critically on the different pedagogic discourses concerning the role of talk in learning implied in the Foundation Stage Curriculum but also to investigate how this theoretical guidance is realised in the everyday practice of playgroup. Particular attention is paid to Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1962, 1967 and 1978) and neo-Vygotskian theories of talk and learning, notions of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) and of guided participation (eg Rogoff, 1990).

The approach taken is therefore sociocultural, with a focus on the contextual nature of learning, as Wertsch suggests:

> *The task of a sociocultural approach is to explicate the relationships between human action on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other.*
> (Wertsch, 1998, p24)

From this perspective, talk and learning are viewed as social and cultural practices, where the social subject is not unitary and coherent but is constituted in a configuration of subject positions. Drawing on the works of Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1986), the study explores how children's communicative strategies are shaped by the social circumstances of their production.

The study has always taken a broad view of what is meant by 'talk', and acknowledges the diversity of children's voices (eg Edwards et al, 1998). To explore the different modes children use to express meaning I have turned to the field of social semiotics (eg Kress, 1997; Kress et al, 2001 and Pahl, 1999a and 1999b), and use the term 'communicative strategies' to describe the different ways that the children studied attempted to convey meanings or to enter into social interaction. By extending the scope of the study beyond words, and by interpreting the children's gaze, facial gestures and body movements as part of both communicative and meaning-making

processes, it is possible to piece together a composite understanding of how individual children begin to conform to the communicative practices of the 'speech community' (Hymes 1996) within the playgroup studied. It is also possible to begin to explain some of the ways in which parents' perceptions of their children as communicators differ from the perceptions of the staff. Both these elements give insights into the genesis of pupil identity.

4. Methodology and Methods

4.1 Methodology

> *People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.*
> (Foucault, personal communication, cited by Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p187)

This quote encapsulates the epistemological beliefs behind my enquiry, which aims to achieve depth of understanding within a specific framework by focussing on longitudinal ethnographic case studies of four 3-year-old children attending the same playgroup. Although researchers have been conducting both qualitative and quantitative studies of early learning for many years, as Graue and Walsh (1998) suggest, research on young children has not attended closely enough to the study of children's experiences in local contexts, in specific cultures, at particular points in time. They argue for a situated and complex portrayal of inquiry:

> *Rather than sampling subjects to represent a population, we must be fiercely interested in individuals, particular individuals. The focus of enquiry must become intensely local ...The lens of research must zoom in to a shot of the situated child. Her context is more than an interchangeable backdrop – it is part of the picture, lending life to the image portrayed by the researcher*
> (Graue and Walsh, 1998 pp8-9)

Similarly, Geertz (Geertz, 1973) argues from an anthropological standpoint that in order to understand what people are doing and why, the contexts in which they are acting must be taken into account. Using longitudinal ethnographic case studies as a methodology, this research project aims to contribute to situated understandings by investigating the fine-grained reality of individual children's experiences of and responses to the new environment of playgroup. Geertz's notion of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) is adopted to penetrate the complexity of the semiotic systems both in the playgroup and in the children's homes and to understand the symbolism of the actions and interactions within those settings.

However, it must be recognised that ethnographic evidence derives from the researcher's personal knowledge of the contexts and participants, constructed over the course of data collection through observations and interviews. Thus the centrality of the researcher's subjectivity in the collection and interpretation of data, and in the construction of knowledge is problematised. A reflexive stance towards the researcher's own social, political and personal location is taken in an attempt to make clear the limitations of the study. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) refer to such an approach as 'reflexive ethnography', recognising that the ethnographic researcher is part of the world studied, and that the researcher's reactions and interpretations should be recognised and exploited rather than resisted.

Recognising the researcher's subjectivity renders the validation of interpretation problematic. To counter balance researcher bias, a collaborative approach was adopted. Throughout the research project, staff and parents were interviewed formally and informally to explore their views on a wide range of issues connected with the children's communicative strategies. Their ideas fed into and shaped the development of the research, and their feedback on the study's findings has been invaluable. This collaboration has helped to ensure that the data and interpretations of data are valid, but to what extent can knowledge derived from interpretive case studies be generalisable? Geertz (1973) argues that deepening our understandings of particularities can give insights into universal or general social processes, and can build on the theoretical resources of previous work. In this study, by observing a small number of children in minute detail, over time, it has been possible to build up composite understandings of their communicative behaviours. Practitioners or researchers may observe the findings elsewhere, or they may be used as basis for further investigative research. As Mitchell states:

> *A good case study... enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable.* (Mitchell, J.C. in Ellen, 1984, p239)

4.2 Methods and site of study

A variety of data collection methods were used to overcome the considerable technical difficulties of recording young children' s quiet voices in a noisy environment, for triangulation to check the reliability and validity of the findings and to provide multiple avenues to arrive at multiple 'truths' These included:

- semi-structured and informal interviews with the playgroup staff and parents
- audio recordings of the children using a lightweight Sony Memory Stick IC Digital Recorder
- video recordings of playgroup and home interactions using a compact digital video camera
- field notes
- research diary

Both video and audio recordings were made to explore the many ways in which the children communicate, mediate and generate meanings. As discussed, this research project adopts the view that focussing exclusively on the children's speech - a mode not yet fully/confidently available to them - might create a false impression of the children as communicatively limited and certainly would limit the picture of their communicative strategies. Using both visual and audio methods of data collection allows a more inclusive vision of how young children use the social and material resources available to them to mediate through the use of words, noises, gaze, facial gesture and body movements, and illustrates how the creation of symbolic meanings is highly social and multi-modal.

The study was conducted in a playgroup housed in a 'temporary' building in the grounds of a local state primary school, which two of my own three children had attended. The playgroup is highly regarded by the local LEA and playgroup development workers, and received a glowing Ofsted report when last inspected in summer 1999. The programme for language and literacy

was assessed as 'excellent', as was the interaction between staff and children. This was a site where I was known to many of the staff and parents, and had a firm foundation on which to build their continuing trust. However, my role as a participant observer was confused by my outsider/insider status as a former mother, playgroup worker and in my new and more nebulous role as a researcher.

The selection of children in this study was purposive, based on gender (2 girls, 2 boys), season of birth (at least one child entering playgroup in each school term) and the playgroup staff's perceptions of the children's communicative abilities (2 children defined by the staff as 'good talkers' and 2 as 'quiet'), representing 'telling' rather than 'typical' cases (Mitchell in Ellen, 1984, p239).

5. Representation and Ethical Dilemmas

5.1 Representation

Issues of interpretation and researcher bias have been discussed above, but interpretation is further dependent upon and contorted by issues of representation. How can children's developing/non-standard pronunciations and highly complex uses of movements, gestures and gaze be faithfully or adequately represented in the written forms required by ethnographic reporting and academic writing? With regard to audio data, once utterances are transcribed, the printed text tends to 'take over' the spoken word, not only by physically separating the words from the speaker's voice, thus stripping them of their nuances, but also by extracting them from the complexity of the rich and situated contexts in they were uttered. Representing the complexity and dynamism of moving video images in written form is yet more problematic. Clifford's argument that ethnographic research constructs narratives or 'fictions' (Clifford, 1986, p6) that can only ever tell a part of the story also applies to representation as an essential part in the process of interpretation. Foregrounding linguistic descriptions ran contrary to the aims of this research project, yet some form of transcription was needed in order to make the data more accessible both for analysis and for subsequent writing.

I began the process of transcription by watching the video sequences with no sound and then with sound, making a log of each video tape. I then listened to and transcribed separately the audio recordings, without reference to the video images or video soundtrack. The audio recordings, which fore grounded the case study children's voices, gave a different perspective on the sounds and images of the video, which had been recorded at some distance from the studied children. The complexity and ambiguity of visual images and spoken utterances lends them open to different interpretations. Combining separately recorded audio and video data of the same moments in time sometimes introduced clarity and reduced ambiguity, but equally it frequently introduced further ambiguities. The field notes, with their often hastily written observations, and the research diary, with its more reflective writing, contributed complementary but again differently conceived data. The task of combining the data from these diverse data collection sources was not only gargantuan, but also required a theoretical standpoint.

As a researcher I fully acknowledge the postmodern argument that the construction of text is subjective (Pink, 2001, p19), as the inclusion of some elements by definition leads to the exclusion of others. Although I worked collaboratively with the staff on some of the video

footage and transcribed extracts in an attempt to include others' perceptions of the experienced realities, in total these negotiated extracts constitute only a small percentage of the data. The processes of collaboration were time consuming for the participants, and occasionally reinforced rather than breached the divide between researcher and researched as the staff became aware of the research discourses and practices that had begun to invade the texts. These experiences were written up in the research diary, giving insights into how the staff and parents positioned themselves in relation not only to the research project but also to their children's education.

Morphy and Banks discuss how images collected in fieldwork assume new meanings in academic writing where they are 'separated from the world in which they were meaningful and placed in a world in which they will be interrogated and interpreted from a multiplicity of different perspectives' (Morphy and Banks, 1997, p16). Pink (Pink, 2001) explores this dilemma in her discussion of different approaches to visual ethnography:

> 'Ethnographers usually re-think the meanings of photographic and video materials discussed and/or produced during fieldwork in terms of academic discourses. They therefore give them new significance that diverges from the meanings invested in them by informants, and from meanings assumed by ethnographers themselves at other stages of the project' (Pink, 2001, p99)

Pink notes that anthropologists and ethnographers are divided in their approaches to the role of the visual in the construction of knowledge. For example, Wright (1998) argues that knowledge is produced through the translation and abstraction of subjective visual images into written text. In this approach, the authenticity and authority of images may become the basis for systematic knowledge, but the images themselves may not have a place, other than as occasional illustrations, in the final product of the research. Pink proposes an alternative approach 'that begins with the premise that the purpose of analysis is not to translate 'visual evidence' into verbal knowledge, but to explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge' (Pink, 2001, p96). In this approach, analysis involves making meaningful links between different research resources such as video, photographs, audio, field notes, research diary, academic writing, local written and visual texts and objects. Each medium represents a different type of knowledge, each contextualising the other. Rather than attempting to piece these different representations together to form a 'complete' picture, it is the role of the researcher to explore the experiences and contexts from which the video recordings, field notes and other materials were produced and to articulate how these different representations produce different strands of knowledge and different 'truths'.

Therefore, rather than claiming that research data represents a single 'reality', this study draws on a variety of data collection methods to evoke different elements of the data collected during field work.

5.2 Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical issues arise in all aspects of research, and are particularly salient when studying vulnerable members of society, such as young children, and in this case, very young children at a moment in their lives when they are experiencing change during their early exposure to the new environment of playgroup and again by infringing on their privacy in their own homes.

There is not scope in this paper to discuss in detail the many ethical issues that have shaped this research project. In general, the ethical stance adopted is neatly argued by Price (Price, 1996, p207) that it is better to 'compromise the research rather than compromise the participants'. However, rather than following a pre-conceived code of conduct, the frequent ethical dilemmas were resolved as they emerged in the field, in their local and specific contexts. Not adopting a coherent set of values does not imply neglecting ethical considerations, rather it implies responding variously and reflexively to complex situations, which Simons and Usher (2000) refer to as 'situated ethics'. In this project, ethical decisions were taken on a minute-by-minute basis, based on the researcher's perceptions and interpretations of the dynamics of the children's, parents' and staff's interactions, intentions and anxieties.

To counteract the seemingly unavoidably exploitative nature of academic research, I have attempted to give something back to the informants, by supplying the children with videos of themselves and talking with them about the videos, the parents and staff with consultation and feedback on the study, and by attempting to be adaptable, respectful and supportive towards everyone involved in the research.

6. Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of detailed Profiles of each child's communicative strategies at home and in playgroup based on the video and audio recorded data, and of the parents', carers' and playgroup staff's perceptions of each child as collected through formal semi-structured and informal interviews. Emerging from these descriptions, key factors that impact upon the children's uses of talk and other communicative strategies are proposed and discussed, including layers of socio-cultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts. In this paper, I briefly outline some of these findings and give examples of the data in written form.

6.1 Perceptions of the children

In varying degrees, the playgroup staff viewed all the studied children as less confident and less able communicators than their mothers did. For example:

MICHAEL (d.o.b: October, due to start school September 2002)

Michaels' mother described him as a 'very confident' and 'sociable' boy who would watch people to begin with, but once he started talking 'there's no stopping him' (27.03.01). His childminder also commented that he spoke well and talked a lot, particularly at lunchtime, when he frequently entertained them by relating events from his life at home. The playgroup staff initially perceived Michael as a quietly confident character who was 'quiet' and tended to play on the edges of others' games. Throughout the year, they were concerned about his talk, describing him as 'very softly spoken' and 'not a great talker' who they wanted to keep an eye on as he might have a 'speech problem' (1.05.01). They felt that a particular friendship he had made in playgroup had helped him to integrate into the group.

JAKE (d.o.b: April, due to start school September 2002)

Jake's mother described him as an 'independent, confident, very chatty' boy who 'talks all the time' (16.05.01). The playgroup leader felt he was 'quite confident', and joined in the activities,

but did not 'talk masses': 'he's got such a sweet face ... I think he uses that and body language cos he doesn't say much'. His key worker, who saw him more often, disagreed: 'he does talk though', 'he joins in' (1.05.01). They noted that he had not really made any friends at playgroup, but tended to play with his older brother's friends.

ZARA (d.o.b: December, due to start school September 2002)
Zara's mother felt that Zara was a 'confident', 'boisterous' and 'very chatty' child who went 'into raptures and described in vivid detail' things she was interested in, particularly events in playgroup. She had a close friend next door who attended the same playgroup, and the mother felt this had helped her to settle. The playgroup staff noted that although 'quiet' initially, by the end of the year Zara had begun to 'blossom' and was 'developing beautifully', if perhaps 'a bit stubborn' and needing to 'learn to follow the rules'. All the staff felt that Zara spoke readily and clearly.

TALLULAH (d.o.b: July, due to start school September 2001)
Tallulah's mother's perception of her daughter was of an 'easy', 'quite outgoing' and 'chatty' child, whose vocabulary had increased considerably and who had begun to acquire quite 'adult' words and expressions. The playgroup staff's perception was of a self-contained almost silent child, who appeared to enjoy the playgroup activities, but did not address or respond verbally to adults or children, and consequently did not socialise with other children. Tallulah appeared to behave and communicate in distinctly different ways in the different settings of home and playgroup. By the end of the year, both staff and parents were concerned by how she would 'cope' at 'big school' when she started in September, aged 4 years and 1 month.

ISSUES

- It is natural that when joining the new environment of playgroup, children appear less confident and talk less than at home. However, for some children these differences appeared to remain throughout the year, whereas for others, the children's confidence and quantity of talk were perceived by the playgroup staff to have increased.
- The members of staff did not always share the same perception of each child, and the group interview discussions about individual children were often very lengthy as the staff began to reflect upon the children's behaviours and on their own professional practice. One key factor in the staff's perceptions of the children appeared to be the fact that, due to timetabling, staff rotas and the children's attendance, each member of staff sometimes only saw a child once a week.
- In general, the perceptions of the mothers and of the staff correlated with the communicative strategies used by the children in the two contexts of home and playgroup. At home, all the children tended to use talk as the main means of communication, with facial gesture and body movement for emphasis or other specific purposes, whereas in playgroup, all the children tended to use primarily facial gesture and body movement either to enter into some form of exchange with an adult or child or to respond, then used talk primarily to be specific, polite or for emphasis.
- The child's season of birth, projected length of time in playgroup and age when due to start school all impacted on the playgroup staff's perceptions of the children and on their practice. For example, they were aware of but not particularly concerned about a child who they felt did not speak a lot (Michael), because he had another year in playgroup before starting

school. They let him develop his confidence and communicative strategies over time. However, they were very concerned about another child who they felt did not talk a lot (Tallulah), not only because her behaviour meant she did not socialise in playgroup, but also because she was only due to attend playgroup for 3 ½ terms before starting school. They began to intervene by employing a range of strategies to encourage her to talk. Their concerns had been relayed both to the home and to the school.

6.2 Observations of children at home

Striking differences were observed in the quantity and type of talk in the two contexts of home and playgroup, and some of the findings are summarised below.

In all the children's homes, once the families had got used both to my presence and to the video camera, the parents and children went about their normal daily business during the observations. Each home visit lasted approximately 2 hours, and during this time the children played while the mothers were busy with household chores, usually in the same or adjoining room as the children. The children sometimes played alone, with a sibling or friend, and sometimes the mother joined the children, for instance to play a game or help with a drawing. Although all the children played silently for some of the time, they frequently addressed their mothers, who usually responded fairly promptly. The mothers addressed the children, for example to check that they were ok, ask questions or to suggest other activities, and the children also contributed to conversations between adults. There was consequently an almost constant stream of talk surrounding the children's play, and many sustained, unhurried and successfully concluded conversations between the children, their parents, siblings and friends were observed.

Frequently in the homes, the children initiated and set the pace of the exchanges. The children's rights to express themselves were rarely questioned, and they usually received their mother's or interlocutor's attention without having to wait for too long. Example 1, shown below, is one of many illustrations. In this example, Jake was looking through an illustrated children's book on farm machinery while his mother was baking. Being otherwise occupied, the mother did not always respond immediately to Jake's questions/prompts (eg Line 10), and he sometimes answered out loud his own questions, (eg Lines 11-12), thus maintaining the conversation by filling in the gaps the mother left in her conversational turns. Sometimes, his mother did not understand what Jake was saying, but asked for and received clarification/repetition (eg Line 27). His mother's attention was never far away, and she offered him prompts that encouraged him to continue conversations, for example to study the book more carefully (Lines 14 and 19). In Line 19, the mother used vocabulary that was specialized, but she seemed confident that Jake was familiar with the terms used. The mother's questions were very specific, and appeared routinised (eg Lines 14 and 19). When Jake had trouble interpreting the images in the book (Line 23), he transmitted his problem using both words and gaze. His mother responded by moving towards Jake, using brief action and words to bring the book illustrations closer to a reality that she knew he had the experience to understand (Lines 29-31).

Example 1

Jake and his mother are in the kitchen. Mother is busy baking near the sink, facing the wall. Jake is sitting on a sofa at the other end of the kitchen, looking through a large format highly

illustrated children's book on farm machinery that he has picked up from a book rack in the corner.

7 Jake: *(gaze to book)* is [1]#dat a pos#t one mum? *(studies picture)* dat not pos#t
8 one *(gaze to different picture on same spread, points)* digger *(moves finger*
9 *towards picture, gaze always to book)* look ... digger #dere
10 Mum: *(no response, busy at other end of kitchen)*
11 Jake: *(looks through pages in book, gaze always to book)* I #couldn't see digger
12 on dis tactor an look is it *(turning page)* here? *(opens page)* ye#s *(opens*
13 *book out and studies page)*
14 Mum: *(out of view, baking)* was #that is that a John Deere tractor?
15 Jake: yeh *(intake of breath as points to picture, gaze then from book to Mum,*
16 *pointing at picture)* I can see a gri#d here
17 Mum: *(out of view)* it is yep
18 Jake: *(turning page, lilt/sing-song as speaks, gaze to book)* #john de-er
19 Mum: *(out of view)* an where's the um post banger?
20 Jake: *(glances up at Mum, gaze to book, turning pages)* it han't go#t pos#t
21 banger *(opening page. pointing to picture)* #look *(pushing page open)*
22 Mum: *(out of view)* careful of the pages
23 Jake: see *(glances up, points to picture)* look it han#t go#t pos#t one on
24 *(glances up at Mum, who is walking towards him)*
25 Mum *(out of view)* it has hasn' it?
26 Jake: *(studies picture closely)*
27 Mum: *(out of view)* what? it hasn' got a post you mean? it has I can see a post
28 Jake: *(studies picture closely)* can' (?)
29 Mum: *(comes over to Jake, points to picture in book)* this post *(points to other*
30 *picture higher on page)* and that *(pointing)* it drops down doesn' it?*(moves*
31 *hand from top picture down to bottom, replicating dropping action,*
32 *moves away)* like daddy's
33 Jake: *(gaze to pictures, studying them closely)* yeh tis like daddy's *(sighs,*
34 *studies another picture on same page)* (16.05.01)

The mothers all treated their children as authoritative 'knowers' of facts, events and vocabulary, and displayed high expectations of their children's specialist knowledge and vocabulary on topics that were discussed in the homes. The 'post banger' conversation above took place in a family that did sub-contracted agricultural work, forming part of 'long' conversations about activities and interests particular to that family. Similarly, Michael had an impressive knowledge of the names of building tools and machinery (his mother's live-in partner was a bricklayer) and Tallulah knew a lot about wildlife and hunting (a reflection of her father's hobbies, signs of which were visible around the home). Not only did they display these areas of specialist knowledge, but in general, the children were confident of the sign systems in their homes. They knew what things were called, what they were for, who used them and who didn't, and on several occasions corrected my inappropriate choice of words, as in Line 19 of Example 2 below:

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[1] # the letter sound following this symbol is either non-standard or unclear
/ indicates interruption (?) indicates word unclear
[indicates simultaneous speech

Example 2

(Jake and his friend Nick are trying to get the Scalectric track to work on the sitting room carpet)

14 Nick: *(to Rosie)* it's not working
15 Rosie: well it ... you have to um ... *(pointing)* untangle the things Nick
16 Nick: *(moves cars and wires, starts to untangle them)*
17 Jake: *(crawls over)*
18 Rosie: and then Jake you'll have to move the cushion won't you?
19 Jake: *(gaze to bean bag)* no it not #de cushion *(gaze to Rosie)* it #de bean bag
20 Rosie: well you'll have to move it won't you?
21 Jake: [*(moves bean bag, jumps on it, sits and watches Nick)* (11.07.01)

Many of the longest home exchanges concerned past shared experiences, which the mother and child jointly reconstructed. Mothers often acted as a communicative prompts and props for their children, encouraging them to continue talking by reminding them of past events or supplying elusive vocabulary. Example 3 shows how Tallulah's mother prompted Tallulah, the girl who hardly spoke in playgroup, to tell me about a hospital visit. Throughout this extract, the mother used questions to prompt Tallulah to talk to me about her hospital experiences (Lines 18, 21, 23,33 and 34), and also intervened in the talk to supplement Tallulah's talk with additional information (Lines 28-29, 31-32 and 45). She prompted Tallulah to continue the story on her own (Line 36), reminding her that I did not know what had happened. This utterance highlighted the fact that the mother and Tallulah both knew what had happened – this was a shared experience that they were re-living through talk together, and gave the impression of having re-lived many times before. There was an intimacy in this exchange around the kitchen table, implied by the setting, by Tallulah's smile in Line 19, and maintained by the joint re-construction of the shared experience. Within the warmth of the exchange, and with the support of her mother available if needed, Tallulah began to give descriptive details of what had happened during her hospitalisation and answered all my questions – something which she had never done in playgroup.

Example 3

(Sitting at the kitchen table, where Tallulah and her younger brother Gary were drawing. Mum tells Rosie about Gary's recent small operation in hospital, then turns to Tallulah)

18 Mum: you went to hospital didn't you Tallulah when you were little?
19 Tallulah: *(gaze to Mum, smiles at her)*
20 Rosie: *(gaze to Tallulah)* did you?
21 Mum: *(to Tallulah)* can you tell Rosie what happened to you?
22 Tallulah: I had a ... I had a sticker an #ney an #de doctors tried to get it out
23 Mum: where did you put the sticker?
24 Tallulah: *(gaze to Rosie)* up my nose
25 Mum: *(laughs, nodding)*
26 Rosie: oh no you put a sticker up your nose?
27 Tallulah: a Noddy one but but #dere's a dog one ... called Bumpy
28 Mum: *(to Tallulah)* a Bumpy sticker *(to Rosie)* that's the dog was called
29 Bumpy
30 Rosie: *(gaze to Tallulah)* but it was a Noddy sticker was it?

31 Mum: *(gaze to Tallulah)* yeh we've still got it haven't we *(laughs)* as a
32 souvenir *(slight interruption as Gary drops his pens, then to*
33 *Tallulah)* and what happened? did they give you a needle in your
34 hand?
35 Tallulah: *(nodding)* yeh
36 Mum: tell Rosie ... she doesn't know
37 Tallulah: I had a needle on my hand
38 Rosie: oh dear did that hurt?
39 Tallulah: no I didn't mind
40 Rosie: didn't you? that's very good
41 Tallulah: well it had some milk in it
42 Rosie: some milk in it right yeh and what did they do with the milk?
43 Tallulah: they put it inside it
44 Rosie: did they?
45 Mum: well the anaesthetic looks like milk *(continues to explain about*
46 *anaesthetic)* (22.03.01)

Not only did the mothers and fathers act as communicative props, but also siblings. Example 4 illustrates how Michael's older sister, aged 6, helped him negotiate his way through a fairly complicated explanation. His sister and friends had been rehearsing a dance routine in the girls' bedroom and had asked me to video them. Michael followed and, unsolicited, began to explain whose bedroom was which. During this brief exchange, Michael's sister quietly added to the information Michael gave me (Lines 7-9), and provided him with vocabulary both when he could not find the right words (Line 14) and when he chose the wrong words (Line 16). Michael did not in any way appear to object to her interruptions, but used the extra time they gave him in the conversations to reflect and find different ways of expressing himself. For example, his sister's interruption in Line 14 gave him the chance to formulate his utterance in Line 15, and he repeated her correct utterances when appropriate (Lines 17-18).

Example 4

(Michael shows Rosie into his sisters' bedroom, where his youngest sister and friends are dancing to music, sits on bottom bunk, then to Rosie)

5 Michael: #this is (my sister's) bedroom
6 Rosie: *(gaze to Michael)* is it?
7 Sister: *(to Rosie)* it's my bedroom (my sister's) bedroom and (my eldest sister's)
8 bedroom and Michaels' and (our brother's) bedroom which is the one
9 down there *(pointing down corridor)*
10 Rosie: aah
11 Michael: *(stands up, to Rosie)* an mine's an mine's in <u>my</u> bedroom *(points down*
12 *corridor)* and (my brother's) up #de top *(points up)* and on #the um in the
13 er/
14 Sister: */(to Rosie)* bunk bed cos they're bunk beds
15 Michael: *(to Rosie)* an I'm down #the top
16 Sister: *(to Michael)* down the <u>bottom</u>
17 Michael: *(to Rosie)* down #the bottom yeh *(turns to look through sister's bag*
18 *hanging from bed)* bottom *(watches girls dancing)* (27.03.01)

In general, the children's interactions in their homes were dominated by talk, with gesture and movement used mostly for effect in fantasy play, for emphasis or to replace complicated explanations or vocabulary. In Example 5 below, Zara, who had extremely confident speech with a wide vocabulary, resorted to body movements to convey meanings either because she could not find the right words or perhaps a verbal response would have been too complicated to bother. On this occasion, Zara's mother had gone to fetch a toy, which I then asked Zara about. Zara's response (Lines 5-11) combined actions and words to convey the mechanics of the toy and what it did. Her use of actions avoided the need to use the technical vocabulary she might have needed to explain how the machine worked, such as 'hole', 'lever', 'wheel' and 'handle', and also avoided the need to use linking or sequential expressions, such as 'then' or 'next'. In addition, her movements conveyed the excitement and movement of the bubbles in a way that words might have struggled to do!

Example 5

3 *(In garden, Mum goes inside to fetch a "bubble machine")*
4 Rosie: *(to Zara)* what bubble machine?
5 Zara: *(raises arms in air)* just a *(puts right arm down, left arm up)*
6 bubble machine *(left arm drops towards right arm, with fingers of*
7 *right hand Zara makes a circle/hole)* you put in #dere *(left arm*
8 *comes down and puts index finger of left hand into hole made by*
9 *right hand)* and bubbles come out *(raises left arm high and waves*
10 *it high in the air)* and you push a button *(mimics pressing button with left hand)* (11.06.01)

6.2 Observations of children at playgroup

In playgroup there was a constant buzz of talk, made up of a mosaic of myriad conversations. However, compared to at home, the four young three year olds being observed engaged in very few sustained exchanges, and many of their exchanges remained unfinished due to interruptions. Some explanations of where and under what circumstances the children became engaged in talk are outlined below, as is the proposition that in order to understand young children's meaning making processes, we need first to recognise fully the multiplicity of the communicative strategies they use.

6.2.1 Rituals and Procedures

One of the most immediately striking features of playgroup interactions was the extent to which the pace and timing of exchanges was set by rituals and procedures. Each 2 ½ hour session of the playgroup studied followed a fairly regular pattern:

- Room 1: Arrival and Free Choice Activities (30-35 minutes)
- Room 2: Registration + Whole Group Activity (25-30 minutes)
- Room 1: Milk Time (20 minutes)
- Outside Play Time (20 minutes)
- Rooms 1+2: Guided/Free Choice (40 minutes)
- Room 2: Show Box (10 minutes)

The activities in italics constitute roughly half of the session time, and denote Whole Group Activities, which all the children participated in together. During the remaining time, the children could choose which activities they wanted to become involved in, although the staff sometimes moved them from one activity to another, and encouraged or guided the children to particular activities to ensure that they experienced a range of activities. Children were never forced to participate in any activities, but by using an inventive range of encouraging strategies, the staff almost always ensured that all children took part in all the whole group activities. The staff also tended to ensure that during each session all the children at least attempted to make one of the set creative tasks of model making or painting, as these tasks were tied closely to the planned curriculum themes and also provided work for the children to take home.

The different children observed spent their free choice time in different ways. For example, although all the children were encouraged to complete the Creative Tasks, some stayed for longer than others. Michael only spent 4% of his overall time on these tasks, whereas Jake spent 9% and Zara and Tallulah both spent 14%. Zara spent only 1% of her overall time on table-top games, Michael 2%, Tallulah 3% and Jake 5% (See Appendix 1 for details of how the activities were categorized). Jake spent very little time on non-adult led table top activities, just 2%, whereas the other children spent far longer: Zara 10%, Michael 14% and Tallulah 25%. Again, there was disparity between the amounts of time each child spent in the more social 'open space' areas such as the Home Corner and Sand Tray. Jake spent 23% of his time these areas, Michael and Zara 19%, and Tallulah just 6%.

6.2.2 Communicative potentials of different activities

Is the variation in the children's choices of activity significant with regard to their communicative behaviour? The findings of this study imply that it might be as the different activity types offered different and largely predictable communicative potentials. For example, at the Craft Table, the majority of the adult to child interaction involved giving instructions, by talking and showing how to make/copy a model an adult had prepared. The children tended to respond to these instructions by doing rather than talking, and mostly used talk to express specific wants or needs, such as 'I want that one'. Example 6 below is one of many instances:

Example 6

Jake approaches the Craft Table, stands watching children at the table, walks to a space next to Anna, who Parent Helper is helping. Rosa returns to table, glares at Jake because he is in 'her' space, Jake steps back)

1	P/H:	*(helping Anna)*
2	Jake:	*(gaze to P/H)* I wanna do one
3	P/H:	*(to Anna)* very good *(picking up model on table)* whose is this one?
4	Jake:	*(moves to space opposite Rosa, to P/H, who follows him)* I wanna
5		do one *(picks up cereal packet and shows to P/H)* dat one (?)
6	P/H:	*(taking packet and bending puts it on table in front of Jake, placing*
7		*the 'model' next to Jake)* very good *(pointing to model then Jake's*
8		*packet)* right so you need to do black and white stripes // can you
9		put the glue on? *(starts to move away)* (05.03.01)

Sometimes at the Craft Table, the children began to relate the activity to something in their own lives, and spoke to the attending adult, but these exchanges were almost always cut short by interruptions. In Example 7, Jake was making an Easter flower out of coloured paper, a straw and a clay pot. The staff had cut out the shapes of petals and leaves etc and the children had to assemble the pieces following the prepared model on the table. Jake asked what the green tissue paper was for, and was told by an adult, Sarah, that it was supposed to be grass to put in the pot. Unconvinced, and eyeing the tissue paper with scepticism, he began to talk about grass at home (Line 10). Sarah responded, prompting him to continue by showing an understanding of his home life (Lines 11-12). Sarah's support resembled styles of interaction in the home, as shown in Example 3, but as frequently occurred, this brief exchange was cut short by Sarah's need to attend to another child (Lines16-17). The conversation was not resumed:

Example 7

10 Jake: we've #got lots of grass we do
11 Sarah: *(kneeling next to Jake)* you have lots of grass do you? does daddy
12 have a big lawn mower that he sits on?
13 Jake: *(nods)* 'e got big one
14 Sarah: has he? d'you help him then?
15 Jake: *(nods, silently continues pushing clay in pot)*
16 Sarah: *(calls out to Climbing Cubes area)* Nick! *(shakes her head at*
17 *Nick)* come an make a flower over here ... come on (06.06.01)

Overall at the craft table, the majority of the child-child interactions involved very little talk, but a lot of gaze and body movements, sometimes to claim a space, as in Example 6, sometimes working alongside each other silently but together with highly synchronised actions.

Gaining physical access to and negotiating cooperative play through body movement rather than talk was also a marked feature of the children's interactions in Open Spaces. In these spaces, adults kept a watchful eye from a distance as the children played, and although joint fantasy play did occur, the observed younger children spent most of their time in these spaces in solitary fantasy play, sometimes scripted by private speech, or on the silent fringes of older children's play. Frequently, children's attempts to talk to other children were either ignored or rebuffed, as illustrated by Example 8, which shows Jake at the Sand Tray. He had carefully negotiated access to the activity alongside older boys, using his body to manoeuvre into a position where he could reach the Sand Toys and had then played alongside the older boys, frequently mimicking their actions as they drove the tractors and diggers around the sand. The older boys chatted to each other, but did not address Jake. Jake made three attempts to talk to the older boys, but each time his comments were either ignored or received the briefest of responses. After 16 minutes of playing silently, he spoke again, referring to his spade (Line 44). Aaron acknowledged his comment (Line 47), but Tobias responded by questioning Jake's pronunciation and modelling how he thought the word should be pronounced (Lines 49,51,53). Jake did not take kindly to this indignity, and attempted to defend his honour by changing tactics (Line 54). Undeterred, Tobias called on the opinion of an adult (Line 57). When the adult did not intervene, Tobias attributed Jake's pronunciation to his young age (lines 60-62), but Jake again attempted to assert his own authority by (mistakenly) saying he would soon be going to 'big school' (Line 63).

Example 8

44 Jake: I #got #de lellow one
45 Bertie: *(still building 'wall', gaze at his creation in sand)* dis is a very very big place an so … an so you won't (?)
46 Tobias: *(banging spade in sand in bucket)* I can't dig
47 Aaron: *(holds spade up to Jake)* I got #lellow!
48 Jake: *(to Tobias, but pointing to Aaron)* an he got lellow
49 Tobias: yellow
50 Jake: yeh lellow
51 Tobias: yel
52 Bertie: dis is a normous hole isn' it?
53 Tobias: *(modelling pronunciation for Jake)* yellow … yellow
54 Jake: *(pauses, to Tobias)* I don't like you
55 Bertie: *(to Aaron)* move! I'm making a wall
56 Aaron: *(moves back a little)*
57 Tobias: *(to Rosie)* he … um … he said um lellow but you're sposed to say yellow … an he keeps saying lellow but you say yellow
58 Rosie: that's right you do
59 Bertie: *(smoothing down sand in rim, to no-one in particular, admiring his work)* hey whadja think of #that wall?
60 Tobias I fink you are (two?)
61 Jake: no I (?)
62 Tobias: oh … are you #free?
63 Jake: yeh …*(smoothing out sand)* I fink … I goin a gool … to big s#gool *(pointing in direction of primary school)* (11.07.01)

Adult-child interactions during Games depended on how busy the Games Table was, on the adult style of interaction and on the nature of the game. When quiet, with only one or two children to an adult, the Games Table offered fertile ground for adults to 'scaffold' children's understandings. The children's responses to the adult appeared to depend partly upon the degree of control the child had over the activity. For instance, Examples 9 and 10 show different adults working in a dyad with Jake on different days, both encouraging him to learn how to play the game and to name colours. In Example 9, Jake responds to the adult either with actions (Lines 8, 10, 13, 19, 21) or single word utterances (Lines 6, 15, 17):

Example 9

(Janet and Jake are playing a board game with different coloured snails. Two dice which are thrown, one with colours, one with numbers, to determine which snail moves and how many spaces it moves)

6 Jake: *(throws dice)* pink
7 Janet: *(gaze to dice)* it's yellow
8 Jake: *(moves snail along track towards end)*
9 Janet: *(points to snail)* move that one one … move it just one space
10 Jake: *(moves snail back to first square)*
11 Janet: and then you need to throw the other dice *(passing dice to Jake)*
12 and see what colour that one lands on

13 Jake: *(throws dice holding arm very high)*
14 Janet: *(picking up dice, shows to Jake)* that's a ...
15 Jake: lellow
16 Janet: that's red that one
17 Jake: wed
18 Janet: can you throw the re...//move the red snail one
19 Jake: *(drags red snail to end of game)*
20 Janet: *(as Jake moves snail)* just one space
21 Jake: *(starts to 'reverse' snail back)* (05.03.01)

On occasions when the children were allowed to set the pace or decide how to play a game they seemed more likely to verbalise their meaning making. In Example 10, Jake had begun to play a game on his own that entailed throwing a large dice with different shapes in different sizes and different colours, finding the corresponding piece and fitting it in the player's puzzle board. The player therefore not only had to match up the shape, but also the size (big or small) and colour of the shape. By the time the adult, Sarah, joined him, Jake had decided how he wanted to play the game and declined Sarah's offer to play with him. Jake had already put in one shape and was looking for a second shape. He had not paid attention to the colours of the shapes, but was focussing on whether they 'fitted', using what looked like trial and error as a strategy (Lines 27-33). By crossing her arms and keeping her hands away from the table (Line 27), Sarah assumed a passive physical stance that appeared to respect Jake's request for control of the pieces. Jake proceeded to study the different comparative sizes (Lines 33-35), possibly giving a glimpse of his understandings of size as a changing rather than constant state (Line 35). Sarah then began to introduce the notion of shape and naming shapes (Line 38), which in turn prompted Jake to name shapes (Line 39). Following Jake's success at recognising shape and size, Sarah then began to draw his attention to the added complication of the colour of each piece (Line 40). By gradually introducing the elements of shape, size and colour, by letting him have control of the pace of the game and the way it was played, Sarah very successfully helped Jake to recognise what he needed to notice in order to complete the game and to talk about his understandings:

Example 10

27 Sarah: won't it fit in there? *(sitting with arms folded, gaze at J's board)*
28 Jake: look *(shakes head briefly)*
29 Sarah: no it doesn't does it? *(shaking head, gaze at J's board)*
30 Jake: it fit here *(slotting piece in place)*
31 Sarah: it does!
32 Jake: *(moves piece to a bigger hole)* not in dis can't fit ere cos it not bigger
33 *(shaking head and holding piece up to Sarah)*
34 Sarah: that's right *(gaze to Jake)*
35 Jake: not bigger yet
36 Sarah: are you gonna pop it in the right hole? *(pointing to 'right' hole)*
37 Jake: dis can *(puts another piece in puzzle)*
38 Sarah: that one can that's a diamond ... [are you gonna put your triangle in?
39 Jake: [yeh ... dis not dimond *(showing triangle piece to Sarah)*
40 Sarah: no *(shaking head)* that's a triangle ... d'you know what colour that

41 triangle is? *(looking at and pointing to piece, then gaze to Jake)*
42 Jake: boo *(gaze to piece)*
43 Sarah: no it's a green one *(pointing to piece)* that one's blue isn't it? *(pointing to other piece)*
44 Jake: *(throws dice)* oh I got dis one! *(finds piece and holds it up to Sarah)*
(04.04.01 p2)

Overall, a detailed analysis of the different activity types, based on observations of 25 playgroup sessions throughout the year, showed that in adult-guided activities, the adult talk combined with the activity and the degree of control the children had defined the parameters for talk, and the child talk corresponded to the opportunities offered within those parameters. The richest exchanges between adults and children occurred when the child was allowed either to set the pace of, initiate or take control of an activity, and the child was with an adult either in an uninterrupted dyad or occasionally also in a small group. In child-led activities and peer interaction, meanings were more fluid and the opportunities for talk potentially more varied, but gaining entry to others' play was a risky business and had to be negotiated, mostly through action, before talk took place. Children's attempts to initiate talk with other children carried no guarantee of response.

6.2.3 Ranges and changes in communicative strategies

As mentioned, at home, the children's interactions tended to be dominated by talk, with body movements used for emphasis when being assertive or to replace particularly complicated explanations or vocabulary. When they started playgroup, the observed children were all quiet and watchful of the new world around them. Over time and in widely varying degrees, they began not only to talk more but also to develop their uses of different communicative strategies. Rather than using talk as a primary means of expression, the children all used combinations of body movements, hand gestures, facial expressions, gaze, manipulating objects and talk to communicate with others and to express meaning making. These uses of different 'voices' appeared to be shaped by the norms and practices of established members of playgroup, both children and adults. For example, both boys and girls frequently negotiated access to activities or to others' play or talk by physically imitating the actions and movements of other children, as discussed briefly in the examples given above. Not until this risky business had been successfully accomplished did they begin to express themselves in words, and as illustrated, their overtures into conversation carried no guarantees of success. One child, Tallulah, had not really made that leap into words before she was due to start school aged 4 years 1 month.

Not only the children but also the staff used a range of strategies particular to the playgroup setting. For example, they used primarily gaze direction to indicate who an utterance was addressed to, and fixed gaze on individual or groups of children to exercise control. Adults also scaffolded children's induction into rituals (eg joining/leaving activities) through a combination of words and arm/hand gestures, coupled with reassuring smiles. When supporting children's learning, adults frequently accepted the children's physical rather than verbal responses as signs of understanding. Although this style of interaction was also observed in the homes, it was far more frequent and exaggerated in the playgroup.

Over time, as the children became more familiar with the meanings and sign systems in playgroup, they all, in varying degrees, became more assertive and more confident speakers. However, they developed styles of talking that appeared to be specific to playgroup and distinctly different from their home practices. Some of these included word-for-word repetition of other children's utterances, joining in group chants, citing or repeating playgroup-specific terminology, citing playgroup rules to other children, learning to be silent during certain activities or to be particularly polite during others etc. Not all the observed children adopted the same strategies in the same ways. As each child began to adapt their talk to the conventions of the institution of playgroup, they appeared to be developing their own communicative identities as pupils, which complemented but were distinct from their home practices.

7. Conclusions

Given that the importance of learning language and of using language to learn is emphasized in current early years debates, this study sheds a little light on the complexities of how young children express themselves in many different 'voices', using not only talk, but drawing on a pool of communicative strategies. By tracking changes over time in individual children's communicative behaviours, and by comparing the contexts of home and playgroup, the study also points towards identifiable factors in the genesis of the children's developing social identities as pupils and in their concomitant communicative strategies. As stated in the introduction to this paper, working with young children is a privilege. This doctoral study is an attempt to interpret, understand and give back to children some of the things that they have taught me. If we recognise and begin to understand the multiplicity of children's expressive voices, then this has profound implications not only for pre-school practice, but also for early years assessment.

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